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FIDELITY-PHILADELPHIA TRUST BUILDING
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

PRESERVATION
Tech Notes
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HISTORIC INTERIOR SPACES

NUMBER 1

Preserving Historic Corridors in Open Office Plans

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One of the last 1920's skyscrapers built in Philadephia, the Fidelity-Philadelphia Trust Building, with its fine Beaux-Arts design and ornamentation, is individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Designed by the local architectural firm of Simon and Simon, the Fidelity Building, as it is called today, synthesizes classical architectural features and standard practices of skyscraper design. The steel frame, limestone-clad structure rises 29 stores in an H-shaped plan, with offices on the upper stories and a grand 3-story bank room on the ground floor.

The double-loaded corridor on each of the office floors, which forms the cross-bar of the H-shaped plan, is a significant feature of the interior, and these corridors are important surviving elements of the historic office plan (see figure 1). While various offices have been altered over time, the corridors retain a high degree of architectural integrity; their historic appearance and materials, including original light fixtures, marble floors and marble wainscoting, paneled doors, and wooden trim, have all survived largely intact.

To meet the expansion needs of

Changes to significant interior spaces should be minimized when developing new office plans

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the large banking establishment, an interior design treatment was developed that allowed the cration of a more open office plan while preserving the significant historic qualities of the central corridors.

Rehabilitation Design Problem

Over the years, many of the small offices were opened up by removing and altering partitions. The management of the bank, whose operations occupy floors 1 through 12, decided that a completely open office plan was needed for flexibility and efficiency; since one department would occupy an entire floor, the bank wanted to establish a unified office area. Most of the existing offices were undistinguished spaces, devoid of decorative detail and finishes, unlike the elegant public spaces on the ground floors and the central corridors above.

Based on the bank's earlier experience in renovating and restoring the main banking room, the project designer and bank management were aware of the preservation concerns regarding the wholesale alteration of historic interiors. Working with a historic preservation consultant, a balance was sought between the need for a more unified office plan and the desired to preserve the central corridor.

Two factors were recognized quite early in the planning. First, any office plan selected would still require an ordered circulation spine from the elevator lobby to the far end of the hall where additional offices were located — a function currently served by the historic corridor (see figure 2). Second, the design solution chosen would have to improve the lighting, since the halls, still lit by the historic fixtures, were considered too dim and the long windowless corridor created an extensive "tunnel" effect.

Rehabilitation Design Solution

The innovative solution arrived at by the design team involved modifications that satisfied the concerns of the bank management and yet substantially preserved the central corridor. Along the corridor, sections of the plaster-covered clay tile wall were removed above the wainscoting and a soffit constructed above, leaving the historic door frames and transoms in place, and forming a series of window-like openings which introduced visual continuity across the office floor (see figure 3).

In determining the feasibility of such a solution, early consideration was given to the impact on existing structural, mechanical, and plumbing systems. Inherent in the H-shaped plan is the resistance of lateral wind loads by the external walls, thus alterations to interior partitions would not affect the building structurally. The only structural restriction was that the internal columns remain in place. Although original construction plans were incomplete, due in large part to the speed with which the building was constructed in the 1920s, it was ascertained that no

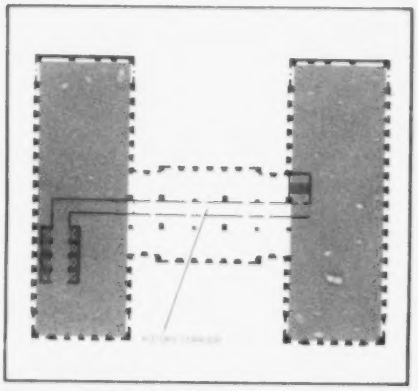

Figure 1. The double-loaded corridor, which forms the cross-bar of the H-shaped plan on each of the upper floors, is significant to the historic character of the building. Drawing: Chris Henry.

Figure 2. The central corridors, which help define the historic office plan, retain a high degree of architectural integrity, including the marble wainscoting and original light fixtures. Photo: Tom Crane.

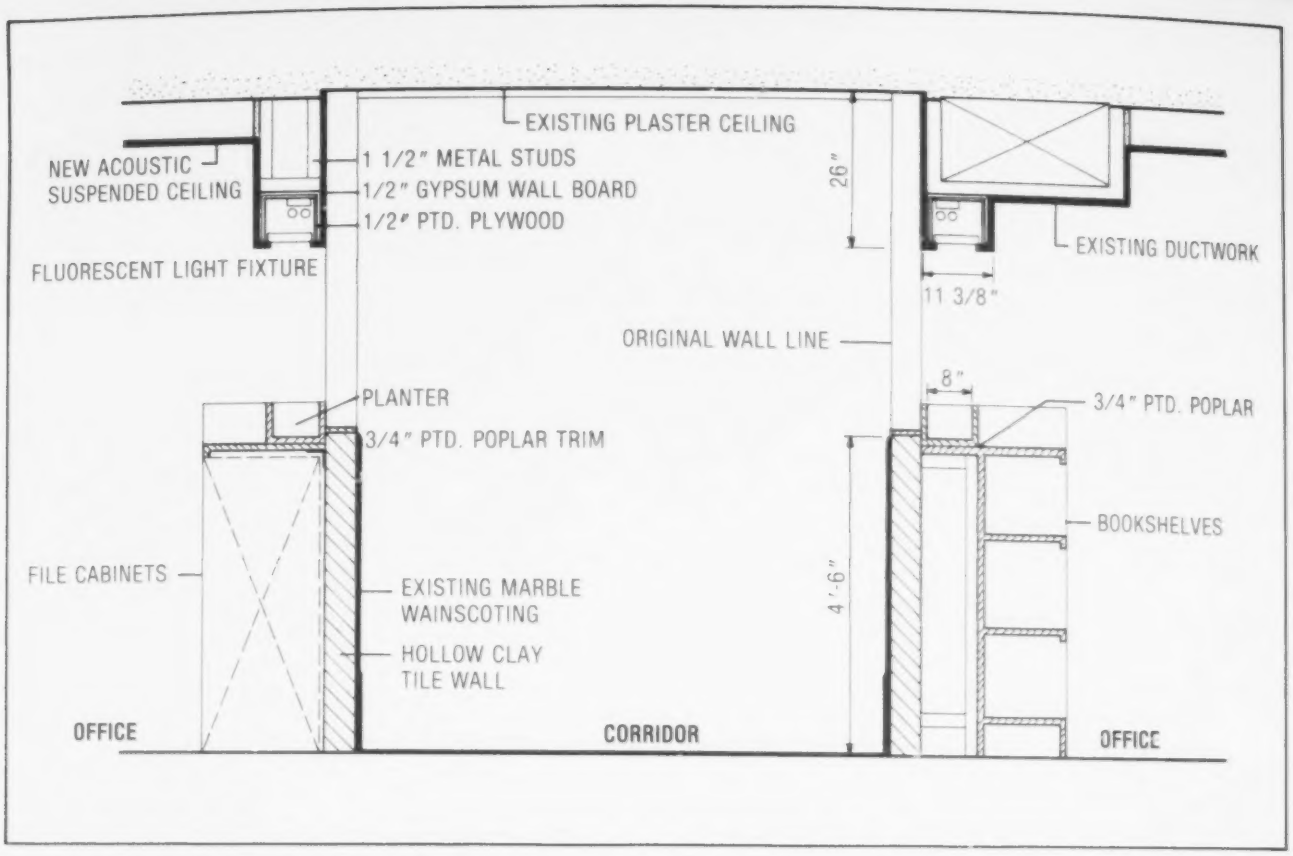

Figure 3. The innovative rehabilitation solution involved removing sections of wall above the marble wainscoting, leaving the historic door frames and transoms in place, and constructing soffits above. Drawing: Chris Henry.

plumbing pipes ran through the walls of the central corridor; since the floor was to be entirely rewired, any existing wiring could be removed without problems.

A full-scale mock-up was then constructed in an unoccupied area of the building to explore the proposed solution, to see how the lighting system and mechanical ductwork could be handled, how the office side wall space could be utilized, and to determine how the historic material would be preserved.

Lower Wall Section

Window-like openings were created by removing selected sections of the existing plaster-finished 6" thick walls while retaining many of the significant hall features and preserving a sense of the historic corridor (see figure 4). The 4'-6" height of the historic marble wainscoting which was being retained in place determined the height of the lower wall sections. To finish off the lower wall section, the marble cap along the upper edge of the wainscoting served as a trim piece (see figure 3). During construction care was taken not to damage the marble. In particularly vulnerable areas, such as around the freight elevators, the entire wainscoting was temporarily removed and stored. For most of the corridor, however, only the marble caps were removed, thereby allowing the clay tile walls to be cut flush with the top of the wainscoting without damaging any of the finished marble. After the walls were cut, 1" x 6" pressure-treated poplar trim was installed on top. The designers decided to use wood instead of marble because of the difficulty in finding a suitable match. An alternative would have been to cut to size some of the existing marble left from other alteration work in the building or to use new marble with no real attempt made at matching.

Figure 4. The window-like openings introduced by the wall removal greatly reduced the "tunnel" quality of the corridor and noticeably opened up the office spaces. Photos: Chris Henry.

Figure 5. Banks of file cabinets and shelving were set flush against the existing wall and enclosed on the sides and tops. Photo: Nelson & Associates.

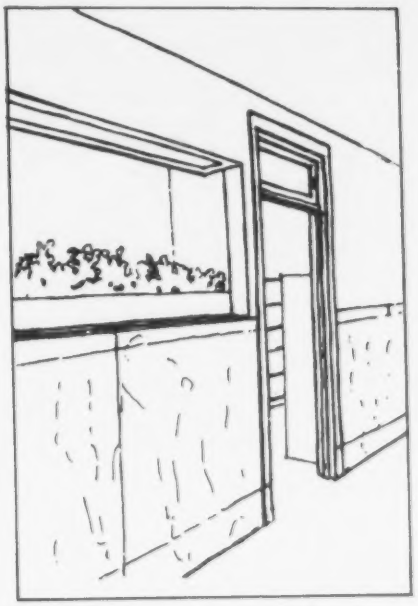

Figure 6. An alternate detail retaining the soffit at the original corridor wall plane would achieve a greater visual continuity of the historic walls, ceilings and doorways. Photo and Drawing: Chris Henry.

Flush to the existing corridor wall, on the office side, file cabinets and bookcases were installed, enclosed on the sides and tops with poplar in order to give a more uniform appearance (see figure 5). Planters were constructed on top of the built-in units flush to the back side of the existing corridor wall and extending approximately 5″ above the height of the wainscoting. The built-in planters provide screening so that employees working at desks near the wall would not be distracted by corridor traffic and so that their workspaces would not be readily visible from the hallway. The planter boxes, 6″ deep and 8″ wide, were constructed of poplar and have a waterproof liner. For the boxes, heart-leafed philodendron plants were selected because of their low height, fullness and ease of care. As a final step, the stored marble pieces were replaced and the historic marble cleaned with a mild detergent.

Soffit

Soffits were constructed, extending from the ceiling, directly above the new built-in file cabinets and bookcases (see figure 3). The soffits establish visual continuity along the upper wall of the corridor, horizontally connecting the door frames and transoms, which were left in place and visually connecting the ceiling, lower wall and floor. The soffits are not, however, continuous along the entire corridor but occur only where sections of wall have been removed. In other parts of the hall, primarily where doors are close together, the full original wall height is maintained. In addition to the desired visual effect of the soffits, they serve practical functions as well. First, they screen from the corridor the existing HVAC ductwork. Second, as the new acoustic ceiling in the office spaces is lower than in the corridor, the soffits create a transition in ceiling height between the two spaces. And third, the new soffits provide much-needed additional lighting, both in the corridor and in the offices, by housing fluorescent light tubes filtered through louvers and further softened by the plants below.

The soffits are simple boxes constructed of poplar and plywood faced with drywall. The soffits located beneath the 18″ high duct on one side are 11 3/8″ deep and 8″ high. On the opposite side the soffits are 26″ high so that the visual appearance of the two sides along the corridor is identical (see figure 3). Since the soffits are set back from the corridor wall line, a 6″ gap in the corridor ceiling had to be patched.

Remaining Corridor Work

Only two existing doorways were removed in the corridor, and the openings patched with marble wainscoting from another part of the building. All the remaining door frames and transoms were retained, although many of the doors were removed and put into storage for possible future use. The original ceiling lights, stored for protection during construction, were cleaned and rehung.

Evaluation

Both the Fidelity Bank and the designers were extremely satisfied with the results of this project. With one of the floors occupied since 1983, it has become a standard solution for the other floors of bank offices.

An alternate design solution for the soffit that might be considered in similar situations involves aligning the soffit with the plane of the historic marble wainscoting rather than setting it back from this wall (see figure 6). By retaining the historic wall plane in the corridor, the necessity for extensive repair of the ceiling could be avoided. In addition, the upper frames of the doors would not project as they do in the Fidelity Building and there would be greater

visual continuity between the half and full wall sections as they are perceived down the hall.

The successful design solution used at the Fidelity Building shows that opportunities do exist to preserve double-loaded corridor plans typical of many large late 19th and early 20th century commercial buildings, retaining many of the historic features and significant material while providing flexibility in office planning. Such opportunities exist particularly where single tenants are leasing entire floors. However, in historic buildings where the plan is more significant, the hall detail is richer, or the historic office space off the corridors is finer, such a design solution as described may not be appropriate, because the significance of such features would warrant more complete preservation. The conditions present at the Fidelity Bank, however, lent themselves to some alteration work. The successful results can be attributed to sensitive planning and a willingness of the bank management to explore innovative design solutions appropriate to their needs and to those of the historic building (see figure 7).

Figure 7. The historic double-loaded corridor plan, most of the hallway's significant features and sense of space have been retained while utilizing an innovative design to achieve a more open, flexible office plan. Photo: Tom Crane.

PROJECT DATA:

Building
The Fidelity Bank (formerly
The Fidelity-Philadelphia Trust
Building)
Broad and Walnut Streets
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Long-Term Building Lessee:
The Fidelity Bank
Broad and Walnut Streets
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Project Dates: 1981-1983

Interior Designer:
Nelson & Associates
215 Church Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Historic Preservation Consultant:
Sara Rose Donovan
Restoration & Renovation Consulting Services
Irvine, California

Project Cost:
The cost for the corridor rehabilitation on the 11th floor was approximately $40,000. This includes the cost for wall removal, new electrical wiring, restoration of marble wainscoting, construction materials and painting.

This PRESERVATION TECH NOTE was prepared by the National Park Service. Charles E. Fisher, Preservation Assistance Division, National Park Service, serves as Technical Coordinator for the PRESERVATION TECH NOTES. Information on the rehabilitation work at the Fidelity Building was generously supplied by John Nelson and Charlotte Friedman of Nelson & Associates, the interior design firm for the project. Drawings appearing in figures 1 and 3 were redrawn by the author based on material originally prepared by Nelson & Associates. Special thanks go to Michael J. Auer and Brenda Siler of the Preservation Assistance Division who contributed to the production of this Tech Note. Cover photo: James L. Dillon & Company, 1928.

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